

What's Wild About African Wild Dogs



"Imelda," a young African wild dog watches Dr. McNutt from a few yards away.

Photograph courtesy Lesley Boggs-McNutt

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What's the difference between African wild dogs and the dogs we know as pets?

For one thing, African wild dogs, which live in Africa, south of the Sahara desert, only have four toes, while domestic dogs and wolves have five. But you wouldn't want to count for yourself, because these are truly wild animals.

"Wild dogs are not somebody's domestic dogs that ran away and didn't come back, although some people used to think that," explains Dr. "Tico" McNutt, who studies these animals at Wild Dog Research Camp in the African country of Botswana. "They are actually Africa's wolf, and just like wolves, they do not make good pets. They need to be out in the wild doing what they are supposed to be doing—ranging many miles every day and hunting to find the food they need to survive and feed pups."

In fact, they travel so far that researchers use radio collars to keep track of them. The collars send out radio signals that tell people where the dogs are. African wild dogs are a separate species from domestic dogs: *Lycaon pictus*, which means painted, wolf-like animal. No two wild dogs have the same pattern to their coats, so it is easy to tell them apart.

Roaming through grasslands, savannas, and wooded areas, they hunt gazelles and other antelopes, baby wildebeests, warthogs, birds, and rats. Incredible hunters, they can run up to 35 miles per hour (56 kilometers per hour).

African wild dogs are smart and sociable, like pet dogs. They enjoy each others' company and live in packs of about six to 20 animals. Both males and females look out for young dogs and make sure they have food. Dr. McNutt was surprised to learn that they like pups so much, they will even take care of orphans that don't belong to them.

African wild dogs talk to each other with two common types of calls, says Dr. McNutt. "The 'hoo' call is a call that they make when lost or when a pack member is missing. It sounds almost like an owl." The dogs can hear the call two or three miles away and easily find each other.

On the other hand, says Dr. McNutt, "The twitter calls are intended to carry only very short distances, and are used to wake up the pack members and rally them to go hunting. They are very high pitched and sound almost like songbird calls."

There's one huge difference between domestic or pet dogs and African wild dogs. Millions of domestic dogs live on the planet, but there are probably fewer than 6,000 African wild dogs left.

Lions and hyenas eat them, but most of all, African wild dogs are threatened by people. Humans hunt them, and ranchers and farmers who don't want them going after cows and sheep poison them. Humans are also destroying the wild, natural habitat they need to survive.

Researchers like Dr. McNutt are working to help people understand how rare and special these animals are. Today more ranchers are finding other ways to protect their cows and sheep from African wild dogs instead of killing the rare and special animals.

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